

God's Kingdom Attitudes

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Please keep your, or turn your Bibles back to Luke chapter 18. As Andrew said, I'll be looking at verse 9 to 30.

I got my Australian citizenship into 2023, and the process took years, because they had to make sure that I was an upstanding person.

In fact, that's what it usually takes to join any community or any society, whether that's becoming a citizen of a country or getting into a work community like a company.

Like when you apply for a job, you need to prove that you can be depended on, because you have a good reputation, good achievements, and good skills.

Imagine you're applying to enter a country or a company, and during the interview or the visa application, you say, there's nothing good in me. I'm a sinner. I'm bad.

[1 : 05] You wouldn't be able to enter the country or the company. But in our passage today, we will see that it's the opposite with God. To enter his kingdom, we need to realize our sinfulness and our helplessness, and that we can't be depended on.

And we will see why. So the passage begins with a parable in verse 9 to 10. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. And so in this parable, two characters are introduced, and Jesus' original audience would have seen the moral contrast between a Pharisee, who is an upstanding citizen, a spiritual leader of Israel, respected by many, and a tax collector, an often corrupt person who worked for the Roman government, hated by the community.

In fact, in all of the Gospels, Pharisees are often, oh sorry, tax collectors are often paired with sinners and prostitutes.

The initial assumption is, if they both could go to the temple to pray, only the Pharisee's prayer would be heard.

[2 : 44] He is the morally righteous one. But, in verse 11 to 12, this is what happens. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed.

Or a better translation would be, the Pharisee stood and prayed about himself. God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. Again, those who heard from Jesus would have agreed. They would have thought, yeah, the Pharisees are righteous.

They are moral. Everything he prays about here is true. This is what they did. In contrast, verse 13, but the tax collector stood at a distance.

He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me. a sinner. Pay attention to the contrast between the prayers.

[3 : 56] The Pharisee doesn't request anything. He simply thanks God. Well, isn't that good if we are thankful and not demanding?

Yes, yes, it is. But why? Why doesn't he request anything? Because he feels self-sufficient. He thinks he is there already.

There is nothing more he needs to do to acquire the kingdom of God. His self-righteousness has done it all. The tax collector, on the other hand, knows that he is helpless.

He doesn't even dare to look up or approach God. And his request? Just one. Have mercy on me. Literally, it doesn't just mean forgive me. Literally, the sentence reads, atone for me, a sinner. He knows that his sins are so many that they can't be forgiven.

[4 : 59] They need to be atoned for, erased. Remember, like the goat during the Day of Atonement. Thrown away somewhere in the wilderness. Forgotten forever.

That's what needs to happen. They can't be forgiven. They have to be erased. And here is the surprise in verse 14.

I tell you, Jesus says, that this man, the tax collector, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The word justified there means considered right in God's eyes. Now, the original hearers would have been shocked to know that God would consider the sinful tax collector right, upstanding, but not the morally righteous Pharisee.

What? How? Can someone so sinful be made righteous just by begging for mercy? And can someone so morally upright be rejected by God?

[6:17] He's done all the right things. Surely that doesn't make sense. That doesn't seem just. In fact, a few years ago, when I was leading a Bible study at another church, there was a guy who came and asked this question.

Can a murderer be admitted to God's kingdom just because he begs for mercy? While someone morally upright, like, for example, I don't know, the Dalai Lama, be rejected just because he doesn't believe in Jesus?

That doesn't seem fair. And so we read on because there's another story in verse 15 to 17.

People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And so in this story, people are bringing babies to Jesus, but the disciples rebuked those people because back then, children were considered unimportant.

[7:40] to bring children to Jesus, to a great teacher like Jesus would have been a disrespect. And I think that's still true in so many cultures.

Growing up in Indonesia, I remember every time there was an important guest, my parents would always tell us, the kids, to stay in the bedroom.

We were hidden away. We were not important. But Jesus welcomes the children because the kingdom of God belongs to people who are like children.

What does that mean? Well, verse 17 there is important. Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

Well, that's what children do, isn't it? They don't have the capacity to work for anything and so they receive. They receive food, clothes, help, without trying to repay.

[8:51] As we grow up, we have learned to feel uncomfortable when receiving because receiving humbles us. It makes us realize that we can't get this thing for ourselves or work for it and therefore we receive receive and that is uncomfortable.

To receive help from someone else, that's a bit uncomfortable. That humbles us. But children don't care about receiving because they know they cannot get things for themselves.

They are dependent on the big people to give them things. and here we see a small hint as to why the tax collector in the previous story is justified but not the Pharisee.

The tax collector knows that he's completely helpless. Like a child trying to reach something on the top rack. Can't do it.

He's a sinner. He can't save himself. His sins are just too many. He's dependent on the mercy of God and so he asks and he receives.

[10:01] The Pharisee on the other hand thinks his righteousness can save him. He's not dependent on God. He's self-sufficient and so he doesn't ask and he doesn't receive.

Instead of receiving the kingdom of God, the Pharisee thinks he can earn it. He can work for it. He can build a stairway to heaven with his self-righteousness.

And so God doesn't give him the kingdom. But the problem remains. Surely, surely a murderer can't just receive a citizenship of the kingdom of God just by begging.

And surely someone morally upright deserves to have the citizenship of the kingdom of God, right? We're so trained to think that way because in this world that's how it works.

Because why don't they? The government of Australia thinks I'm morally upright enough to be admitted as a citizen. Why can't I be admitted into the kingdom of God by my moral righteousness as well?

[11 : 20] And so we read on to the third story. Verse 18. A certain ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Now here's another ruler. And just like the Pharisee, he wants to build a stairway to heaven. He's asking Jesus, what must I do to inherit or to merit or to achieve the kingdom of eternal life?

How can I be upright enough to merit the kingdom of God? Verse 19. Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good except God alone. Now, Jesus here doesn't affirm or deny that he's good. He merely points out that no human being is good enough.

Only God alone is good. Now we know that Jesus is God and therefore he's good. But that's beside the point. And Jesus' point is, no one is good enough to inherit eternal life.

[12 : 24] Only God is good. Only God can meet his own standard of good. Don't even try. No human can meet that standard.

God is good. But if you still insist on trying to build a stairway to heaven, then this is what you need to do. Verse 20. You know the commandments.

You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother. So Jesus lists the commandments.

If you want to build a stairway to heaven, do them all. Try. Do them all. Now we know the Ten Commandments which have two categories.

The vertical commandments that pertain to one's relationship with God. Like there shall be no other God but the Lord. Don't use the Lord's name in vain. And then there are the horizontal commandments that pertain to one's relationship with others.

[13 : 27] Now these Ten Commandments can be summarized by the two great commandments. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength.

Vertical. And love your neighbor as yourself. Horizontal. Now Jesus only mentions the horizontal commands here. Probably because in the Gospel of Luke, the horizontal is the fruit of the vertical. That's why in another place in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says, if you do things to these people here, you do them to me. But if this ruler wants to build a stairway to heaven, he'll need to do them all.

And here's how the ruler answers. Verse 21. All this I have kept since I was a boy, he said. What else, Jesus? I've done them all.

There's nothing more to do, nothing more to learn. I have built the stairway to heaven. And so Jesus says in verse 22, prove it. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, you still lack one thing, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

[14 : 48] And come follow me. Prove it, Jesus says. You have said you've done them all. You have loved God with all your heart and loved your neighbor as yourself. Prove it, sell everything, give to the poor as an expression of your horizontal love, loving your neighbor as yourself, and then follow me as an expression of your vertical love towards God.

Surely, if you love God with all your heart, then God, the treasure in heaven, should be enough for you. You don't need all these possessions. Sell them all.

Verse 23, when he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy. He can't do it. Turns out, he hasn't loved God with all his heart or loved his neighbor as himself.

The stairway to heaven is an illusion. And so Jesus says, verse 24 and 25, Jesus looked at him and said, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. It is impossible for a camel to enter the eye of a needle.

[16 : 10] Try. Even if you chop a camel up into pieces, you can't make it enter the eye of a needle. But the rich trying to enter the kingdom is even harder.

Why? Because both the Pharisee and this rich ruler depend on themselves, on their status, on their wealth, on their self-righteousness to enter into the kingdom of God.

And it's impossible to enter the kingdom of God using those means. Impossible. And this is how impossible it is.

Imagine if the ruler said yes to Jesus' command. He didn't love his money anymore. He wanted to love God with all his heart.

And so he said yes. He sold everything and gave it all to the poor. What would happen? He would say to himself, or at least he would think, I did this.

[17 : 13] I followed the command. I succeeded. Thank you, God. thank you, God, that I'm not like those other rich people who depended on their wealth and hoarded material treasure on earth.

And then he would not feel the need to follow Jesus. He would feel that he could save himself using his own self-righteousness. He's self-sufficient. He doesn't need God.

He became the Pharisee. Impossible, isn't it? 16th century theologian John Calvin says the human heart is a factory of idols.

We destroy one idol, wealth in this case, and we produce another, self-righteousness. And this is why if we try to strive for the kingdom in ourselves, we fail miserably.

it's impossible. We can't build a stairway to heaven. In fact, the last time human beings tried to build a stairway to heaven was the Tower of Babel.

[18 : 27] And it was done not out of obedience, but out of pride. It's impossible to enter the kingdom using anything from ourselves.

Jesus. And so, verse 26 to 27, those who heard this asked, who then can be saved? It's impossible, Jesus.

Jesus replied, yeah. What is impossible with man, though, is possible with God. It is impossible for humans to build a stairway to heaven and to enter the kingdom of eternal life.

But God has made it possible. How? We couldn't get up. So God came down in the person of Jesus.

And Jesus lived a perfect life loving God with all his heart and all his mind and all his strength because he is the beloved son of God.

[19 : 31] And he loved his neighbor as himself. He loved even his enemies. perfectly. He did it all.

And then he died for our sins. And this answers our previous question about the Pharisee and the tax collector. Can someone so morally upright be rejected by God?

Yes. Because his moral uprightness is not enough to meet God's standard of good. To love God with all ourselves and to love our neighbor as ourselves?

That's impossible. Even the most morally upright person can't do it. But can someone so sinful be made righteous just by begging for mercy?

Yes. In Jesus. Because Jesus has died and he has paid for the punishment. The tax collector prays, have mercy on me, atone for me.

[20 : 42] And isn't that what Jesus has done? Jesus built the stairway to heaven. And he gives it to us if we follow him.

Because he is the stairway to heaven. heaven. And that's why after Jesus' death and resurrection in the book of Acts, when the people ask the same question, what must we do?

The answer is repent and be baptized. That's all we need. Repent and recognize that we are sinful and helpless and we can't get there by ourselves.

And be baptized. Because baptism is a symbol of our union with Christ, the stairway to heaven. The kingdom of God is received, not achieved.

Because it has been achieved by Jesus alone. That's such great news, isn't it? And so what about us?

[21 : 55] Are we still striving to enter the kingdom of God using our own righteousness? Or do we recognize our helplessness and beg God for mercy?

Do we think, oh, I'm a good person, I'm an upright citizen, I'll get to heaven when I die? Do we ever think, thank you God, thank you God, that I'm not like those sinners who support the LGBTQ agenda and abortion?

I'm better than them. Or, thank you God, that I'm not like those addicts and gamblers. I'm better than them. Thank you. Or, do we recognize that we too are sinners, falling short of God's perfect glory, and that every day we ought to live a life of repentance and continually pray, have mercy on me, God.

Without your grace in Jesus, I am nothing, I'm worth nothing. Are we assured that we enter the kingdom simply because of Jesus and nothing else?

I think I've told you about Anselm, a theologian who lived in the 11th century, and he said this when he consoled dying people. He said, while life still remains in you, in Jesus' death alone place your whole trust.

[23 : 34] If you die now and the Lord your God judges you and says, you're a sinner, say, yes I am. But I interpose the death of Jesus between my sins and you.

And if God says, you deserve condemnation, say, yes I do. But I offer the merits and holiness of Jesus for those which I should have, but don't.

We receive the kingdom, not strive after it. And second, because we don't rely on ourselves or on anything we have, we can use everything for the sake of the kingdom.

we don't need to sell everything like the ruler. What Jesus asked of him doesn't apply to all Christians. We don't need to sell everything, but we do need to use everything for the kingdom as a response to God's mercy.

Now that means if God puts it in our heart to use our money for the kingdom, we say, yes Lord. Lord. If God puts it in our hearts to use an empty bedroom in our house to sponsor an orphan, we say, yes Lord.

[25 : 00] If God puts it in our hearts to use our profession as a missionary overseas, we say, yes Lord. Even if that means potential danger, 70 more Christians in the past week have been found beheaded in Congo.

God might want us to go to places like that. And we say, yes Lord. Or even if we have to let our children or grandchildren go so that they can go to a mission field, we say, yes Lord.

Because we don't put our hope in any of these things. We put all our hope in Jesus who has lived and died for us.

and so we use them all for the sake of the kingdom. And if that sounds scary, it is. But listen to how the story ends in verse 28 to 30.

Peter said to him, we have left all we had to follow you, Jesus. Truly I tell you, Jesus said to them, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come eternal life.

[26 : 21] Jesus affirms, yes, you have followed me. And again, you will receive, that's the word again there, receive, eternal life in the age to come, in the new creation.

We don't have to strive for it, we receive. And here on this earth, we will receive a family, a church, their church. Those who have abandoned all hope in what they have shall receive a lot more through the loving community of the church where people give and receive, love and be loved, comfort and be comforted.

Many times as much in this age. I